STAP SCREENING TEMPLATE

GEF ID	**11720**
Project title	**Promoting Sustainable land management for the achievement of Land Degradation Neutrality for Improved Equity, Sustainability, and Resilience in Rice Landscapes of Liberia**
Date of screen	**November 26, 2024**
STAP Panel Member	**Ermias Betamariam**
STAP Secretariat	**Guadalupe Duron**

1. Summary of STAP's views of the project

STAP welcomes Liberia's project on Land Degradation Neutrality for improved rice landscapes. As the project developers assert, the project has the potential to generate several co-benefits in reducing poverty, improving food security, and strengthening climate change adaptation capacity. STAP encourages the project team to embrace this thinking and explicitly design the project to generate co-benefits while maximizing the targeted global environmental benefits (GEBs).

STAP also notes the project team's efforts to assess future climatic risks on agricultural productivity and communities' resilience to climate impacts. STAP encourages the project developers to go further in their assessment by applying it across all the interventions.

Lastly, STAP suggests that the project team consider integrating ecosystem-based approaches alongside agricultural interventions, such as enhanced biodiversity conservation or ecosystem restoration measures. These could strengthen the project's resilience to the impacts of climate change, enhance ecosystem services, and contribute to long-term land degradation neutrality.

Note to STAP screeners: a summary of STAP's view of the project (not of the project itself), covering both strengths and weaknesses.

STAP's assessment*

- □ Concur - STAP acknowledges that the concept has scientific and technical merit
- □ X Minor - STAP has identified some scientific and technical points to be addressed in project design
- □ Major - STAP has identified significant concerns to be addressed in project design

Please contact the STAP Secretariat if you would like to discuss.

2. Project rationale, and project description – are they sound?

See annex on STAP's screening guidelines.

The project rationale clearly describes how land degradation affects Liberia and the context influencing it, such as agricultural expansion and deforestation. It draws from a Land Degradation Neutrality (LDN) assessment to detail the state and causes of land degradation at the national level. This analysis is used to logically justify the selection of the target sites (Lofa, Nimba, Grand Kru, Montserrado, Bong counties), whose biophysical and socioeconomic characteristics are described.

Additionally, a pre-analysis is provided on the compounding effects of land degradation on biodiversity loss, water scarcity, and communities' increased exposure and sensitivity to climate change impacts in the target areas. The rationale makes it clear that this project will not only aim to deliver benefits from sustainable land management, but also help achieve national development goals, such as poverty reduction, and improved food security. STAP also agrees on the potential of this project to generate these co-benefits, including food security and climate adaptation capacity.

STAP appreciates the detailed characterization of the project area using the three LDN indicators: trends in land cover, land productivity, and soil organic carbon, as well as the LDN principles. It is also encouraging to see the project envisioning transformational change by addressing key levers such as capacity building and inclusive planning to engage all sectors of society. Incorporating policy development as part of the effort to strengthen governance would also be beneficial.

Additional qualitative and quantitative indicators will likely be necessary to complement the LDN indicators. Hence, STAP is pleased that monitoring (i.e., selecting indicators to complement the core indicators) will be given further attention at the project's inception phase. Neutrality, a central feature of LDN, should be given further attention when selecting additional indicators to monitor land management.

STAP is pleased to see a thorough theory of change figure and a good description of its logic in the project description. STAP notes that enablers and assumptions are detailed in the description and figure of the theory of change. Some further thinking will be necessary around assumptions and their associated risks to strengthen the project logic further. This will also include thinking about how the key driver trends (e.g., climate change risks, increased population—as mentioned in the PIF) are reflected in the project design and appropriately monitored.

The components also appear appropriate to support the project objective of strengthening sustainable land management practices in rice landscapes for LDN purposes. As mentioned above, STAP would like a more prevalent focus on neutrality (the core of LDN) throughout the interventions.

Note: provide a general appraisal, asking whether relevant screening guideline questions have been addressed adequately – not all the questions will be relevant to all proposals; no need to comment on every question, only those needing more attention, noting any done very well, but ensure that all are considered. Comments should be helpful, evaluative, and qualitative, rather than yes/no.

3. Specific points to be addressed, and suggestions

To strengthen the project during its design, STAP recommends the following:

1. As the PIF states, the project will likely generate co-benefits associated with poverty reduction, food security, and climate adaptation. STAP recommends that the project team monitor with this intent and identify metrics to monitor the co-benefits. STAP's briefing note on co-benefits is useful for consulting on this topic.
2. STAP welcomes the initial description (in the rationale) of how climate risks will affect agricultural productivity, biodiversity, and communities' vulnerability to climate change impacts. To strengthen the project's durability, STAP recommends further strengthening the description of plausible futures by using climate projection data (up until 2050) for Liberia or downscaled data, if available, for the targeted regions. One source for climate projection data can be found at UNDP's Human Climate Horizons. STAP also recommends analyzing the interactions between trends of key drivers as part of this narrative – e.g., climate risks and population growth were cited in the PIF. Consequentially, the narratives should be used to explore potential interventions that increase the project's robustness for enduring outcomes.
3. As a whole, the components form part of an overall LDN logic. A few suggestions would further strengthen achieving LDN, however:
    a. In component 1, to help strengthen institutional coherence between ministries, the project developers may wish to implement activities supporting national-level policy coherence. This would involve mapping current policies supporting integrated land use planning (essential for LDN) and identifying alternative approaches that strengthen this planning, such as secure land tenure systems. Refer to STAP's guidance on policy coherence.

b. For component 2, the project team is highly encouraged to assess the land's potential. There is an inherent and important assumption that the lowland areas, which are described as degraded, will be able to be restored for rice cultivation. Refer to STAP's LDN guidance.
c. As mentioned above, it is important that the project design considers climate risks. Once these risks are accounted for, the project team might need to adapt the irrigation interventions mentioned in component 2. The temperature projections for Liberia, which are substantially higher than the global average for the next decade and beyond, might induce drought conditions and affect irrigation potential. So interventions need to be designed to ensure robustness to these and other plausible futures.
d. Neutrality, the central element of LDN, is missing in components 2 and 3. STAP recommends neutrality as a central feature of sustainable land management, and integrated land use planning interventions (component 2). Assessing losses and gains should also be a key characteristic of the monitoring and learning plans to be carried out in component 3. STAP recommends consulting on STAP's LDN guidance and UNCCD's scientific conceptual framework on LDN (the neutrality and monitoring sections) to reorient components 2 and 3 to include neutrality.

4. STAP recommends strengthening the theory of change by linking the assumptions to outcomes. This will help strengthen the logic for each pathway. Also project developers should also specify how to address negative outcomes if assumptions prove incorrect. For instance, if assumptions about the effectiveness of specific restoration techniques (such as rehabilitating lowland areas for rice cultivation) do not hold, the project should outline a clear strategy for pivoting or adapting the approach.
5. Also, the project team should think carefully about the risks associated with the assumptions – and how can they be addressed to achieve the appropriate outcomes. Those risks that cannot be addressed despite a good project design, should be listed in the risk table. For example, the climate risks and mitigation measures listed as context risks, should be a key feature of the theory of change and reflected in the design of the components. Risks related to the potential of the land to be rehabilitated, or restored, should be included as an innovation risk in the risk table because they will remain despite good project design, and will require continuous tracking during the project implementation. Further guidance on risk will be available on STAP's website.
6. It is good to see that the project envisions transformational change by addressing key levers such as capacity building and inclusive planning to engage all sectors of society. Including policy development as part of the effort to strengthen governance would also be beneficial.
7. The recommendation to assess land suitability for rice cultivation (in component 2) is important, but it is also essential to consider potential trade-offs between agricultural expansion and other land uses, such as conservation or forest restoration. While restoring degraded land for rice cultivation may offer short-term food security benefits, it could undermine long-term goals related to biodiversity or water quality. Suggest conducting a land use optimization analysis to help balance agricultural, environmental, and socio-economic outcomes.

ANNEX: STAP'S SCREENING GUIDELINES

1. How well does the proposal explain the problem and issues to be addressed in the context of the **system** within which the problem sits and its drivers (e.g. population growth, economic development, climate change, sociocultural and political factors, and technological changes), including how the various components of the system interact?

2. Does the project indicate how **uncertain futures** could unfold (e.g. using simple **narratives)**, based on an understanding of the trends and interactions between the key elements of the system and its drivers?

3. Does the project describe the **baseline** problem and how it may evolve in the future in the absence of the project; and then identify the outcomes that the project seeks to achieve, how these outcomes will change the baseline, and what the key **barriers** and **enablers** are to achieving those outcomes?

4. Are the project's **objectives** well formulated and justified in relation to this system context? Is there a convincing explanation as to **why this particular project** has been selected in preference to other options, in the light of how the future may unfold?

5. How well does the **theory of change** provide an "explicit account of how and why the proposed interventions would achieve their intended outcomes and goal, based on outlining a set of key causal pathways arising from the activities and outputs of the interventions and the assumptions underlying these causal connections".

    - Does the project logic show how the project would ensure that expected outcomes are **enduring** and resilient to possible future changes identified in question 2 above, and to the effects of any conflicting policies (see question 9 below).
    - Is the theory of change grounded on a solid scientific foundation, and is it aligned with current scientific knowledge?
    - Does it explicitly consider how any necessary **institutional and behavioral** changes are to be achieved?
    - Does the theory of change diagram convincingly show the overall project logic, including causal pathways and outcomes?

6. Are the project **components** (interventions and activities) identified in the theory of change each described in sufficient detail to discern the main thrust and basis (including scientific) of the proposed solutions, how they address the problem, their justification as a robust solution, and the critical assumptions and risks to achieving them?

7. How likely is the project to generate global environmental benefits which would not have accrued without the GEF project (**additionality**)?

8. Does the project convincingly identify the relevant **stakeholders**, and their anticipated roles and responsibilities? is there an adequate explanation of how stakeholders will contribute to the development and implementation of the project, and how they will benefit from the project to ensure enduring global environmental benefits, e.g. through co-benefits?

9. Does the description adequately explain:

   - how the project will build on prior investments and complement current investments, both GEF and non-GEF,
   - how the project incorporates **lessons learned** from previous projects in the country and region, and more widely from projects addressing similar issues elsewhere; and
   - how country policies that are contradictory to the intended outcomes of the project (identified in section C) will be addressed (**policy coherence**)?

10. How adequate is the project's approach to generating, managing and exchanging **knowledge**, and how will lessons learned be captured for adaptive management and for the benefit of future projects?

11. Innovation and transformation:

   - If the project is intended to be **innovative:** to what degree is it innovative, how will this ambition be achieved, how will barriers and enablers be addressed, and how might scaling be achieved?
   - If the project is intended to be **transformative:** how well do the project's objectives contribute to transformative change, and are they sufficient to contribute to enduring, transformational change at a sufficient scale to deliver a step improvement in one or more GEBs? Is the proposed logic to achieve the goal credible, addressing necessary changes in institutions, social or cultural norms? Are barriers and enablers to scaling be addressed? And how will enduring scaling be achieved?

12. Have **risks** to the project design and implementation been identified appropriately in the risk table in section B, and have suitable mitigation measures been incorporated? (NB: risks to the durability of project outcomes from future changes in drivers should have been reflected in the theory of change and in project design, not in this table.)